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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 000863

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SUBJECT: GOVERNMENT FORMATION UPDATE: KURDS FEAR NO PROGRESS; SHIA COALITION MEMBERS EXPRESS EAGERNESS TO MOVE FORWARD; SUNNIS MORE OPTIMISTIC

Classified By: Political Counselor Robert S. Ford
for Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

¶1. SUMMARY. While all eyes on March 16 were focused on the first session of the Council of Representatives (CoR), several members offered their assessment of the government formation negotiations. Kurdish Alliance members were more pessimistic about the progress being made, while Sunni Arab members were more optimistic that an agreement can be reached in a few weeks. Shia Coalition members hope that the deadlock can be broken soon so that work of the CoR can get started. An effort by the Kurds, Sunni Arab Tawaffuq Front, the Allawi group and some of the Shia Coalition to declare their own large front in order to pressure Prime Minister Jafari to step appeared to run into last-minute trouble. END SUMMARY

¶2. (C) Presidency Council Chief of Staff Kamran Karadaghi said matter-of-factly to PolOff just after the first Council of Representatives (COR) on March 16 that no one is in charge of the current government formation process. While President Talabani remains personally optimistic that the government will be formed by the end of March, Karadaghi said that no one has enough power to push through a resolution. Both Tehran and Shia radical cleric Moqtada al-Sadr are extremely weak, according to Karadaghi. "The more Sadr and the Iranians keep pushing for meetings with Talabani and KDP leader Masud Barzani, the weaker they look," he said. In addition, by courting Sadr so openly, the Iranians have angered SCIRI leader Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim, and alienated one of their longtime partners in Iraq. Kurdish Deputy Prime Minister Rowsh Shaways agreed that resolution on the cabinet is far off, but noted that despite the minor altercations the first COR session had gone well. Calling from home, senior Kurdish parliamentarian Mahmud Othman claimed that heavy traffic had kept him away from the first session but noted wryly that the Iraqi leaders could have held this session weeks ago "for all the progress they made today."

¶3. (C) KDP member Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari told PolOff March 16 that he thinks that the government formation negotiations are not progressing fast enough. When PolOff asked who should push the pace, he did not have an answer. Foreign Ministry Chief of Staff and new parliamentarian Fawzi Hariri predicted privately to PolOff March 16 that forming the cabinet would take at least another month.

SHIA REACTIONS - NOT SURE WHEN IT WILL BE RESOLVED,
BUT EAGER TO GET TO WORK

¶4. (C) In a conversation March 16, SCIRI politburo member Redha Jawad Taki dismissed the CoR first session as just a hole to jump through. He said the hard part is still to come. When PolOff asked how soon the CoR will convene to vote on new government positions, he had no ready answer.

¶5. (C) As a first time CoR member, SCIRI's Dr. Ijra Faisal Oda expressed her hope to PolOff March 16 that the CoR would move forward with committee assignments even though the rest of government was not ready. She is eager to get to work on programs to help the people. Shia Coalition Independent Abidah Ahmad Sakhil al-Ta'i told PolOff March 16 that she is impatient for the PM nomination to be decided because others look upon the Independents within the Shia Coalition as the PM spoilers. She wants to put the PM nomination behind her so the CoR can focus on committee work.

SUNNIS MORE OPTIMISTIC

¶6. (C) Sunni Arab Tawaffuq Front official Mahmud Mashadani said that the Tawaffuq that was pushing for agreement on the framework for decision making in the new government, and have proposed several concepts for procedural arrangements. Another Sunni politician, media hog Salih Mutlak, said many in the negotiations are distracted because they are thinking about their own future jobs. (Comment: Mutlak likely betrayed

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his own motivation. End Comment.) Sunni Arab parliamentarian Mithal Alusi told Poloff that the atmosphere among the parties, though still far from ideal, has gotten better, with the prospect of an agreement on the makeup of the new government possible within a few weeks.

¶7. (C) There had been discussion among the Kurdish Alliance, the Iraqi Islamic Party, Allawi's National Accord party and the SCIRI party of announcing on March 17 a new, national umbrella front as a way of pressuring Ibrahim Jafari to step down from the prime ministership. As of early March 17, however, we were hearing from multiple sources that the announcement would be delayed. It appeared there were some last-minute coordination problems between the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP) and the Tawaffuq Front leadership of which the IIP is a part.

KHALILZAD